

IN AMERICA'S BACKYARD

The most notorious Office of Public Safety adviser of the 1960s and 1970s did not work in South-East Asia, but in Latin America. While Phoenix interrogators shocked, bludgeoned, and starved their way through tens of thousands of Vietnamese civilians ostensibly protected by the Geneva Conventions, the United States also spent more than US\$51 million on police training in 'America's backyard'. The standard Cold War rationale applied: 'The structural weaknesses, social cleavages, and growing pains of less developed countries constitute particular points of vulnerability which the Communists seek to exploit so that they may divert the desire for reform and development for their own ends', said Secretary of State Dean Rusk in 1962. According to Colonel John D. Weber, who oversaw counterinsurgency training in Guatemala, 'The communists are using everything they have including terror. And it must be met'.

Dan Mitrione was a Johnny Appleseed of American DDD torture. Mitrione grew up in Richmond, Indiana, a small town about a hundred kilometres east of Indianapolis. He was known in Richmond as good-natured, hard-working, and always eager to please. After high school he served in the Navy and joined the Richmond Police Department. In 1956, he became Richmond's chief of police and by the late 1950s worked for the FBI. He accepted a spot in the Office of Public Safety's adviser program in 1960 and was sent to Brazil to oversee police training in Belo Horizonte and Rio de Janeiro. In *Hidden Terrors* (1978), former *New York Times* Saigon bureau chief A. J. Langguth wrote about Mitrione's time in Latin America. It was

here, said Langguth, that the 'straightforward police chief from the heartland of America had been corrupted like Mr Kurtz in "Heart of Darkness"'.

By 1967, the Office of Public Safety had spent US\$5.9 million in Brazil and trained nearly 100 000 police officers—one-sixth of the country's total police force. Dan Mitrione personally trained hundreds of these Brazilian officers. Manuel Hevia Cosculluela was a Cuban intelligence agent who infiltrated the CIA during the Cold War and worked closely with Mitrione in Latin America. According to Cosculluela, Mitrione introduced new sophisticated methods of torture to police and held training sessions on unwilling human guinea pigs. 'Mitrione was a perfectionist', he said. 'He was coldly efficient, he insisted on economy of effort. His motto was: "The right pain in the right place at the right time". A premature death, he would say, meant that the technique had failed.'

Prior to his arrival, Brazilian interrogators brutally beat suspects until they neared death, at which point they either talked or were killed. Under the guidance of Mitrione, Brazilian police learned the refined techniques drawn from the KUBARK manual.

Cosculluela recounted a conversation where Mitrione outlined his philosophy on interrogation: 'He said that he considered interrogation to be a complex art. First you have to soften up the detainee with blows and the usual abuse. The objective was to humiliate the victim, separating him from reality, making him feel defenseless. No questions, just blows and insults. Then just silent blows.'

Fernando Gabeira, a former member of a revolutionary group in Brazil, was arrested by police in Sao Paulo in January 1970. According to Gabeira, who today is noted Brazilian politician, the torture he endured reflected 'psychological and technical expertise'. In 1974, he recounted:

when we enter a prison they force us to remain kneeling on the floor, looking at the cells where those who have been tortured are thrown half-dead and they also keep us awake for a long time. This is a procedure which is supposed to break our resistance ... Nowadays they employ highly sophisticated sound equipment and cells where the temperature can be changed abruptly ... There are also cells where we were kept so as to completely lose any sense of time, cells where one loses any sense of day and

night, and where sound equipment produces dreadful noises all night, all in fact, part of the pre-torture process.

In Rio de Janeiro, where Mitrione spent the bulk of his time while in Brazil, these tortures were combined in a torture device known as 'the fridge'. In the fridge, said Gabeira, 'the temperature can be changed in such a way that one feels cold for a long time'.

Fred Morris, then an American missionary with the United Methodist Church, lived in Brazil for eleven years before being arrested, tortured, then expelled as a result of his close ties with Archbishop Dom Helder Camara, a vocal opponent of the military dictatorship. According to Morris, police in São Paulo also used 'the fridge', a square cube measuring about a metre and a half equipped with a heating and cooling unit, speakers and strobe lights. Morris recalled that prisoners were locked inside and exposed to a series of ordered stimulations. In the first series, strobe lights would blink, the temperature would drop, and the sound of jet-engine noise would blast from the speakers. Then, a different series would begin. The box may heat up to 115 degrees Fahrenheit (46 degrees Celsius), the lights would turn off and there would be silence. 'When they get a pattern established, which apparently three to four cycles will do', Morris said, 'then they reverse it. Suddenly there is loud noise accompanied by heat, strobe lights instead of darkness.' Extended exposure to the random stimulations, he added, resulted in nervous breakdown.

Under Mitrione, the Office of Public Safety also introduced painful new electrical tortures to the Brazilians to augment the effects of the fridge. According to Langguth, Mitrione informed police about the levels of electric current a body could withstand using frayed wires from military field telephones. Victim Fernando Gabeira stated: 'From personal experience, I know that real torture only begins when they start applying electric shocks.' Another victim, Paulo Schilling, described the effects of electrical torture in his memoir, *Brasil: Seis Años de Dictadura y Torturas* (Brazil: Six Years of Dictatorship and Torture) (1970). According to Schilling:

the electrical discharge causes a sensation which is difficult to describe: a physical and psychological commotion ... The tortured victim shouts with all his might, grasping for a footing, somewhere to stand in the midst of that chaos of convulsions,

shaking and sparks. He cannot lose himself or turn his attention away from that desperate sensation. For him in that moment any other form of combined **torture**—paddling, for example—would be a relief for it would allow him to divert his attention, touch ground and his own body which feels like it is escaping his grasp. Pain saves him, beating comes to **the** rescue.

Under **Mitrione**, Brazilian police pioneered a new method of **torture** combining electricity, sensory deprivation and forced standing. First **the** Brazilians would cut open a couple of sardine tins and force **the** hooded captive to stand on **the** sharp edges. They would then give **the** prisoner something very heavy to hold and force him to raise it above his head. When **the** prisoner began to collapse from exhaustion, jolts of electricity were delivered, making his feet stick to **the** sardine tins and forcing him to stand up straight. Some called this technique **the** ‘Statue of Liberty’. Others dubbed it **the** ‘Vietnam’.

In 1967, **Mitrione** was sent to Washington to teach at **the** International Police Academy and was then transferred to Montevideo in 1969. CIA agent William Cantrell, then **the** Assistant Director of OPS, briefed Cosculluela on Mitrione’s new assignment. ‘Cantrell called me to Montevideo and told me that a new public safety director would be bringing instructions on new courses of interrogation’, Cosculluela recalled. ‘Cantrell said that **the** new man, **Mitrione**, was not part of “our program”—he never referred directly to **the** CIA—but had worked very closely with “our program” in Brazil.’

Upon arrival in Uruguay, Cosculluela said, **Mitrione** held a **torture** training course for police. **The** session took place in a specially designed soundproofed room in **the** cellar of Mitrione’s Montevideo home. ‘**The** special horror of **the** course was its academic, almost clinical atmosphere’, he said. According to Cosculluela:

As subjects for **the** first testing they took beggars, known in Uruguay as *bichicomés*, from **the** outskirts of Montevideo, as well as a woman apparently from **the** frontier area with Brazil. There was no interrogation, only a demonstration of **the** effects of different voltages on different parts of a human body, as well as demonstrating **the** use of a drug which induces vomiting—I don’t know why or what for—and another chemical substance. **The** four of them died.

Mitrione's expertise was used by Uruguayan police to put down a growing guerrilla movement led by the Tupamaros. During the 1960s, the Tupamaros were known for their populist antics and Robin Hood-like flair. They raided corporate offices to expose graft and kidnapped high-ranking politicians suspected of corruption and tried them in 'People's Courts'. One Christmas, members of the group commandeered a food truck destined for a wealthy suburb and 'redistributed' turkeys in impoverished neighbourhoods. The group's motto, 'Either everyone dances or no one dances', earned them many supporters from Montevideo's poorest slums.

Before Mitrione arrived, Uruguayan police tactics were brutal but rudimentary. Uruguayans did employ electrical torture but used an old Argentinean stun device commonly used in abattoirs. Mitrione arranged for the police to get electrified needles of varying thickness made by the CIA's Technical Service Division. The engineers at TSD—likely the same inventors who produced Brazil's dreaded fridge—designed needles small enough to be slipped between teeth to deliver an electrical charge directly to the gums.

In addition to electrical torture, Mitrione also taught police how to use sexual humiliation and forced standing to break victims down. According to Langguth, Mitrione gave the following instructions to an officer on how to treat one reluctant trade union official: 'Undress him completely and force him to stand facing the wall. Then have one of the youngest policemen goose him. Afterward, put him into a cell and hold him for three days with nothing to drink. On the third day, pass through to him a pot of water mixed with urine.' To goose, according to the *American Heritage Dictionary*, means to 'poke, prod, or pinch [a person] between or on the buttocks'.

Mitrione also stressed the importance of doctors in the process of interrogation. Langguth discovered that in Uruguay:

One of the truly disheartening things for so many of the torture victims was having a doctor come into the room where they were being tortured and thinking, 'Well now he'll put a stop to it. He's from the medical profession.' And instead, the doctor was just there to monitor life signs and be sure they weren't torturing to death. And Mitrione bragged about that kind of thing.

Cosculluela also recalled Mitrione's beliefs about the role of doctors during torture sessions. Over drinks at his Montevideo home, Mitrione told him: 'When you receive a subject, the first thing to do is determine his physical state, his degree of resistance, through a medical examination. A premature death means a failure by the technician.'

On 31 July 1970, the Tupamaros kidnapped Mitrione. The group first photocopied his Indiana FBI card and sent it to the press, then demanded the release of 150 Tupamaros prisoners in exchange for Mitrione. Uruguayan officials, upon the insistence of the US government, refused to negotiate. On 10 August 1970, Mitrione's body was found on the back seat of a Buick convertible. He was shot twice in the head.

In America, Mitrione was portrayed as an innocent 'technical co-operation expert' who died at the hands of heartless communists. 'Dan exemplified the highest principles of the police profession, that of social service,' said White House spokesman Ron Ziegler. He added:

There are a quarter of a billion people in Latin America and in many of these countries the Communist terrorists are trying to tear the fabric of democracy apart. Some of these countries, Uruguay among them, realize that the best protection against this is the development of a democratic police, and asked the United States to help. And this is what Dan was doing in Uruguay.

On 29 August 1970, Frank Sinatra and Jerry Lewis staged a benefit concert in Richmond, Indiana, for the Mitrione family. 'I never met Dan Mitrione, yet he was my brother just as you, Jerry and I are brothers', said Sinatra to a tearful crowd of 4200. He added: 'What do you say in the wake of a sacrifice such as Dan Mitrione's? Abe Lincoln sort of said it all when he said, "It is for us, the living, to dedicate ourselves to that unfinished task for what they gave their last full measure of devotion."'

Mitrione's death was treated differently outside the USA. French historian Alain Labrousse later wrote that in Uruguay Mitrione 'was an example, both in his character and in his job, of the most blatant interference by the United States into the workings of a foreign state'. The former Uruguayan Chief of Police Intelligence, Alejandro Otero, spoke out against Mitrione only days after his murder. In a candid

interview published in *Jornal do Brasil*, a leading Brazilian newspaper, Otero said that **Mitrione** had instituted **torture** as a routine measure during **the** interrogation of suspects. According to Otero, 'The advisors advocated psychological **torture** to create despair. In **the** next room, they would play tapes of women and children screaming and tell **the** prisoner that it was his family being tortured'. Otero stated that he disagreed with Mitrione's 'scientific methods of **torture**'. The Tupamaros, he said, targeted **Mitrione** because 'he had turned to violent methods of repression and **torture** with **the** support of **the** government'. According to Otero, 'The violent methods which were beginning to be employed caused an escalation in Tupamaro activity. Before then their attitude showed that they would use violence only as a last resort'.

After Mitrione's death, Uruguayan President Jorge Pacheco Areco declared martial law and assumed dictatorial powers. The Tupamaros were eventually wiped out—but at tremendous cost. A Uruguayan Senate investigation later concluded that **torture**, specifically psychological **torture** and electric shocks, was a 'normal, frequent and habitual occurrence' in Uruguay's jails and police stations. In 1974, dozens of victims of **American**-sponsored **torture** testified at **the** Russell Tribunal on Repression in Brazil, Chile and Latin America. Uruguayan Senator Zelmar Michelini, who two years later was kidnapped, tortured and murdered in Argentina, testified that **the** number of Uruguayans tortured was 'more than 5000 while over 40 000 people had been held as political prisoners'. The comparable figures for **the** USA in proportion to population, he pointed out, would be about 3 200 000 political prisoners and 400 000 **torture** victims.

In 1975—the same year **the** Rockefeller Commission introduced **the** **American** public to **the** horrors of MKULTRA—Congress cancelled OPS's funding. During its lifetime, OPS advisers trained more than ten thousand students at **the** IPA and more than one million police in **the** developing world, and had shipped more than US\$150 million worth of technical equipment abroad. The correlation between **the** use of **torture** in Vietnam, Brazil and Uruguay and OPS funding in those countries is in no way unique. **Torture** was commonplace in twenty-four of **the** forty-nine countries that had hosted **the** program.